

ABBA! FATHER!

Whither the Spirit?

Twelve years ago I became increasingly interested in the Holy Spirit. I thought the Spirit was supposed to change me, but I didn't see the change I wanted to see, despite my best efforts to yield to God. Was I not, in fact, yielding to the Spirit? Was I not pushing the right button?

Because I was disillusioned both by the sin I was seeing in my life and by the Spirit's apparent disinclination to do anything about it, I designed for myself a simple reading project. If the Holy Spirit was supposed to change me, I figured I needed to find him. I began reading the New Testament on a painstaking mission to find the Spirit of God. As I crawled through the scriptures, Romans 8:12-17 and its companion passage, Galatians 4:1-7, jumped off the page and into my heart.

What—or, more precisely—who is the Holy Spirit? All major branches of what's commonly known as Christianity agree that he is God himself, the third person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, some are like the new believers in Ephesus, who said “we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2). Even for those who believe in the Holy Spirit, he remains in the shadows, partly because he seems more interested in spotlighting the Father and the Son. For most of us, the Holy Spirit is generally less understood and less appreciated than the Father and the Son.

Paul, in Romans 8:12-17, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the Holy Spirit that is particularly relevant to those of us who are disenchanted by our apparent ineffectiveness.

Romans 8:12-17:

¹²So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

The deeds of the body

In verses 12-13, Paul says that the removal of any prospect of condemnation for believers leaves them with an obligation, which evidently consists of gratitude to God. On the other hand, we have no obligation to the flesh: to fallen humanity that is in rebellion against God and his will. Sin took over humanity so that “the flesh,” in Paul's terminology, becomes roughly equivalent with sin. Men and women became slaves to sin and obligated to it. Through our connection to the death and resurrection of Christ, God has liberated us from sin. We are no longer subjects to sin, so we are not obliged to it in

any way. This needs to be said because the powerful attraction of sin makes it feel as if we are obliged to obey it.

The destination of those who are obliged to the flesh, and who therefore live according to the flesh, is death, which is equivalent to condemnation: punishment for sin at the end of one's life. In the vein of Romans 8:5-11, Paul in verse 13 is making a clear distinction between those who have the Spirit and those who don't, between those who belong to Christ and those who don't. If one lives according to the flesh, if one's life is dominated by sin, he does not have the Spirit, and he does not belong to Christ.

Paul makes this distinction, using terrifying language to describe the destiny of those who don't belong to Christ, to disabuse us of any notion that there is any benefit to sinful choices. He is not saying that believers who make sinful choices will be condemned. He is simply illustrating the dreadful nature of such choices by saying that they are more in keeping with dead-end humanity. And he's also challenging any unbelievers to change their fleshly ways and choose Christ.

Those who are obligated to God, who have the Spirit and belong to Christ, are, with the Spirit's help, "putting to death the deeds of the body." Paul can speak of sinful deeds in this way because human bodies are still part of the old age, subject to decay and death. Our bodies are not evil. God created them and will redeem them (Romans 8:23). Until he does, our bodies can be used for good or evil.¹ To put such deeds to death means to turn away from sinful choices. Believers do not look to some kind of law and seek to measure up to it; they look to the Spirit, who orients them toward God, motivates them and empowers them.

Paul is not in this case commanding that we put to death the deeds of the body; he's assuming that we are doing so. Those who possess the Spirit do in fact put to death the deeds of the body, at least to some degree. If they don't, they do not possess the Spirit, and they do not belong to Christ. For only those who possess the Spirit, and therefore put to death the deeds of body, however imperfectly, "will live" beyond the grave in God's new creation.

Nevertheless, nothing in verse 13 would encourage us to become lackadaisical. Paul is very capable, as in Romans 13:11-14, of commanding that we "lay aside the deeds of darkness."

The leading of the Spirit

Possession of the Spirit, and his activity in our lives, is the guarantee that we will be resurrected. His activity, further defined as his leading, is evidence, in the present, that we are sons of God, connected to the life of God and destined for life with God beyond death.

The Spirit of God not only replaces the law, he assumes the role of the pillar and the cloud, both of which led Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land. In the Exodus, the Lord called Israel his son and he called individual Israelites his sons (Exodus 4:22, Deuteronomy 14:1). Now, as we journey through the wilderness of this world toward the new creation, God leads us by his Spirit and calls his sons. The Spirit orients us, and leads us in countless ways we may never be aware of, toward the new Promised Land.

Reminding us that we have no obligation to the flesh, Paul says that the work of the Spirit has nothing to do with slavery to sin. Those who do not possess the Spirit are

slaves to sin: They continue to reject God and his will. This kind of slavery involves both fear of freedom from sin and fear of condemnation before God. In slavery to sin, you can't win: You're afraid you'll be missing out if you don't indulge sin, but you're also afraid of the judgment of God if you do. The Israelites, after being liberated as the sons of God, wanted to return to the slavery of Egypt. Dependence on God, who seemed unpredictable, was too much for them.

Some Jews in Paul's day no doubt would have argued that the Holy Spirit would lead believers to be under the Mosaic Law. But that would involve slavery, because sin co-opted the law and held Israel captive (Romans 7). For Jews who have been freed from the law to go back under the law is to become enslaved to sin again. For Gentiles who had been slaves to sin apart from the law to now go under the law is also to become enslaved to sin again. For anyone to choose any kind of lifestyle of rejecting God and his will is to become enslaved to sin.

The Spirit of adoption

Slaves live in fear. Sons do not. Our heavenly Father, just like the father in Luke 15:11-32, wants sons, not slaves.²

Paul calls the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of adoption."³ We were born into sin, but we have been adopted into God's family.

The Spirit does not inspire fear. Instead, he inspires us to cry, "Abba! Father!" Palestinian Jews in the First Century spoke Aramaic, a Hebrew dialect. *Abba* was an Aramaic word for "father" that conveyed tenderness. It was used by children, but also by adults when addressing their fathers in a familiar way. Jesus addressed God in this way and instructed his followers to do the same.

Addressing God as "Abba" became so meaningful that New Testament authors, who wrote in Greek, retained the Aramaic wording in three cases (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:14, Galatians 4:6). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will." The Spirit makes Jesus' prayer our prayer, enabling us to address God intimately and trustingly, even in dire circumstances. This cry is the Spirit's answer to the cry of Paul, speaking for conflicted Israel as a whole under the law in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Answer: Christ, who clears the way for the Spirit, who inspires the cry of free sons, not frustrated slaves.

In this way, by enabling and inspiring us to connect with God as our Father, the Spirit witnesses to us that we are children of God. As children of God, we cry "Abba," not always, of course, using that word, but with a sense that we are sons and daughters of God.

Heirs of God

As children of God, we are also heirs of God, which also means we are fellow heirs with Christ. Christ is God's Son, so we are God's sons. Christ is God's heir, so we are God's heirs with him. Jesus, the Messiah who represents Israel, receives what Israel was promised: the world. The Promised Land was called Israel's inheritance. Both Jesus and Paul understand God's promise of the land to embrace the entire earth. (Matthew 5:5, Romans 4:13). It's the world, the new creation, the new Promised Land. And it will be

ours to rule as vice-regents of our Lord Jesus Christ, fulfilling the original human mandate (Genesis 1:26-28, Revelation 22:5).

All this sounds well and good until we find that we must also share Christ's sufferings in order to share his inheritance. The good news, in one sense, is that we have no choice in the matter. All will suffer in this sin-sick world, whether or not they belong to Jesus. The better news is that the sufferings of believers are uniquely connected to Christ and therefore bring about the character that prepares them to serve God in the new creation (Romans 5:3-4). Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

Satan offered Jesus the world, but without suffering (Matthew 4:8). When Jesus prayed the "Abba" prayer in the garden, the Father sent him to the cross. Jesus tells us that we have to take up our own crosses, so to speak, if we want to follow him (Matthew 16:24). When we cry out to the Father in intimate trust, we're signing on for a cross-shaped life. But the suffering, whatever form it takes, is integral to being glorified with Christ: being resurrected, as Christ was, to rule with him.

The Spirit creates intimacy and trust

How do we, turning away from sinful choices, put to death the deeds of the body? How do we live in freedom, apart from sin, in the wilderness of this world, with all its rocks, thorns and thistles? How do we deal with the fear of freedom on the one hand and the fear of condemnation on the other? We address all these questions with the help of the Holy Spirit. How is the Spirit helping us? By reminding us that we are sons and daughters of the Father.

At first, this may not be altogether encouraging for those who have been damaged by their earthly fathers. For some, thinking of God as Father has little appeal. All of us, though, need to have our minds renewed to think correctly about God as Father, because none of us had parents who loved and disciplined us flawlessly. A good place to start is with the father in Jesus' story in Luke 15. The best images of our heavenly Father have him bringing shame upon himself by leaving his house to rescue his two sons, the youngest of which is lost in indulgence and the oldest of which is lost in resentful obedience. If we sit with those images for a spell, our minds will be renewed so that we increasingly appreciate God as our Father.

This is our Father's world, and he gives it to us that we might run, laugh, dance, play, weep and work in his presence as his sons and daughters.

Moreover, he gives us his Holy Spirit, who moves us to relate to him as "Abba," intimately and trustingly. Clearly, God wants us to relate to him this way. He wants it so much that he doesn't simply leave it up to us but he sends his Spirit to nurture this kind of relationship with him. It's not simply that the Father leaves the door unlocked and the light on; it's that he goes out, at any hour of the night, to bring us home.

What does it mean to relate to the Father in an intimate way, as inspired by the Spirit? It involves being free to share with the Father anything that comes to mind, from joys and praises to sorrows and laments. Most of all, it involves love, as the Spirit floods our hearts with the Father's affections that they might spill over in our response to him.

What does it mean to relate to the Father in a trusting way, as inspired by the Spirit? It means, quite simply, trusting him—heartache by heartache, prayer by prayer and inch by inch—with your entire life, even while knowing that if you pray "Abba" in the

garden, the answer may be a cross on Golgotha. If you trust the Father with your life, your life will take the shape of the cross. You will share the sufferings of Christ. Your life will be less comfortable than you had hoped it would be. But you will know that your sufferings are part of the birth pangs that result in a new world. “Though He slay me,” said Job, “I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

Relating to God as “Abba,” intimately and trustingly, is eloquently represented in the prayer that Jesus taught us:

*Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed by Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

Jesus invites us to address God intimately, as Father. But he also invites us to trust him supremely, for how can we pray for God’s will to be done unless we’re confident that his will is good? If we are able to pray this prayer in a heartfelt way, then the Spirit has moved us to do so.

How, then, do we sense the impulse of the Spirit? At no time are we unable to cry out “Abba! Father!” The Spirit is always about relating us to the Father. There will be occasions, however, when we sense his movement in profound and, quite often, unexpected ways. It’s as if a window opens and we find ourselves gazing upon the Father, if only for a moment.

The Spirit is relational

Romans 8:14-17 and its companion passage, Galatians 4:1-7, make an important contribution to a full-orbed appreciation of the Holy Spirit and his work. They show the Holy Spirit to be, in a word, relational. They are by no means the only passages that speak of the Spirit in this way, but it’s easy to pass over the others if you’re predisposed to think only of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is both relational and powerful. In fact, it’s impossible to draw a clear line between the two attributes. The Spirit is relational because he’s powerful, and he’s powerful because he’s relational.

The Spirit doesn’t simply want to show himself powerful in your life by defeating sin, serving others and winning people to Christ. No doubt he is interested in all those things, and more. But it’s not as if you’re the cord and he’s the current and he’s just passing through because he wants to turn some wheels somewhere.

God is not interested in obedience. He’s not interested in the kind of obedience offered up by the dutiful but resentful older son in Jesus’ story in Luke 15. He’s not interested in the obedience offered up by some scribes and Pharisees, who honored God with their lips even though their hearts were far from him (Matthew 15:8). God is interested in obedience from the heart, a kind of obedience nurtured in relationship with God that takes over one’s whole life. That’s why he effected a new covenant, which

features the work of the Spirit, who writes the law on our hearts and circumcises our hearts (Romans 2:15, 29).

The Spirit wants to nurture your relationship with the Father. He helps us enjoy God. And don't we need this kind of help? Enjoying God is not something many of us do well. And if the Spirit is successful, you'll be a son who is also a more available servant.

When I began searching for the Holy Spirit in the New Testament 12 years ago, I felt like crying out "Wretched man that I am!" instead of "Abba! Father!" As I made my way through the gospel of John, through Acts and into the writings of Paul, I found the Spirit. But I found him in a way that didn't entirely conform to my expectations.

I assumed that the Spirit was concerned with the same thing I was: performance. The Spirit was supposed to change my wretchedness and make me a better person, I thought. He was supposed to enable me to live well. He was supposed to give me the power to obey God. But as I crawled through the New Testament, my view of the Holy Spirit began to change, and by the time I reached Galatians 4, I was ready for this: "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

I was stunned. How many times had I read that verse before, not to mention Romans 8:15? A hundred? Yet I had missed it. I had missed what it was saying. I had missed what the scriptures were saying. I got up from my desk and proclaimed to myself, "That's what the Spirit's about!" At that moment, the Spirit opened a window for me to see God, and I cried out, "Abba! Father!"

The Spirit is about relationship, about showing us the truth of who God is, in all his majesty and all his love, and bringing us closer to him in a Father-son relationship. As we understand at deeper levels who the Father is, and as we become more intimate with him, we are changed. We can't help but be changed. I wanted the change without the relationship, because, as I came to discover, I was afraid of the relationship. So instead, I chose performance. Today, however, the Spirit's soft and tender voice is at least somewhat more intelligible. I hear him crying out within me, and now I cry out with him, "Abba! Father!"

A game of catch

When I worked for a newspaper in the East Bay, I lived close enough to walk to work. It was July 4. Among the editors, I drew the short straw and had to work. The first part of the walk was downhill. As I was walking down the hill, a boy, 6 or 7 years old perhaps, was walking up the hill. He was toting two baseball gloves. He was tired from walking, and becoming increasingly so as he trudged up the hill.

"Where are you going with those big gloves?" I asked.

"I'm going to get my dad," he said.

My heart immediately sank, because I concluded, rightly or wrongly, that the boy didn't live with his father and that he had to walk a long distance to be with him on a holiday. The boy continued his journey, but I decided that mine could wait. I wanted to see, if possible, the outcome. Inconspicuously, I staked out the nearby school yard. A few minutes later, the boy emerged from an alleyway and skipped onto the field with one of the gloves in tow. His father followed, wearing the other glove. As I watched father and son play catch, I thought of our heavenly Father and his relationship with us.

Isn't that what it's like? Yes, life sometimes seems like a lonely and burdensome journey up the hill. At times, the Father seems a long way off. But come the Fourth of July, in the new world, we're going play catch with Abba.

The Spirit, it seems to me, would inspire us with such thoughts in this world, no matter how wearisome the journey, so that we cry out, even now, "Abba! Father!"

Scott Grant / 7-2-06

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¹ In Romans 13:11-14, Paul defines deeds of the body as "deeds of darkness," which include carousing, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, sensuality, strife and jealousy. He also describes particularly Gentile and Jewish sins in Romans 1:28-30 and 2:21-23, respectively.

² Paul says in Romans 6:22 that we are enslaved to God, but he's contrasting slavery to God with slavery to sin. Slavery to God is an entirely different kind of servitude. It's the kind of service that an adoring son offers to a loving father. It's a kind of slavery that's voluntary and free.

³ Some translations, including the New American Standard Bible, assume that Paul is talking about something other than the Holy Spirit and translate his words as "spirit of adoption." The context, in which Paul is discussing the work of the Holy Spirit, and his similar wording in Galatians 4:6, where it's clear he's speaking of the Spirit, would indicate that we should translate his words as "the Spirit of adoption."